

Department of Human Services

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Articles in Today's Clips Monday, March 3, 2008

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Social agencies fail boy

Monday, March 03, 2008

TED ROELOFS

Nine-year-old Nicholas Braman didn't have to die.

That's the finding of a state report that says Michigan's child protection workers failed to do everything they could to safeguard the boy from a father who tortured two older brothers before he killed Nicholas with carbon monoxide.

Authorities found the boy dead in a bed in his family's Stanton home in October, along with his father, Oliver Braman, 46, and his father's new wife, Nancy Kaczor-Braman, 43, a 1982 Bridgeport High School graduate.

"More could and should have been done to protect Nicholas Braman," the state Department of Human Services reported in a four-page document.

Nicholas, his father and stepmother ingested nighttime pain relievers and breathed carbon monoxide the father pumped into their home from a pickup. Authorities found the bodies, along with a suicide note the boy penned, after the father missed a court-related meeting.

A month before, Braman had pleaded guilty to using an electric cattle prod on his 14- and 15-year-old sons the previous August.

The report faults social workers in Montcalm and Saginaw counties for failing to follow policies and procedures that might have saved the life of the boy.

His father and mother, Rebecca Jasinski of Saginaw, were married from 1991 to 1999 and had three sons. Jasinski has said Braman's early threats of suicide during their union evolved into homicidal fantasies that he described in front of their children. Their divorce spawned court records filled with accusations of abuse and counter-claims.

In Saginaw, the latest document details, the County Department of Human Services substantiated an allegation of child abuse against Oliver Braman about the time his three children moved to the home of their mother in 2004 in Saginaw County.

County officials "failed to monitor the situation satisfactorily to ensure that the mother obtained legal custody. Unbeknownst to Saginaw DHS, the three children ended up residing with their father."

In August 2007, Saginaw County's Department of Human Services received an allegation Braman was "inappropriately disciplining" children with a cattle prod in his Stanton home. After that incident, Nicholas' brothers, then 14 and 15, waited until their father, a truck driver, was out of town and Kaczor-Braman and Nicholas were sleeping.

With the help of a half-brother, who didn't live there, they climbed down a ladder and rode their bikes four miles into town. They called their mother in Saginaw to get them.

The two older children remained with their mother while Nicholas continued to live with his father.

"Based on the information the department possessed related to past abuse, the severity of the abuse and the guilty plea, DHS should have filed a petition with the court to more definitively secure Nicholas' safety," the report found.

Randy Barst, director of the Saginaw County Department of Human Services, directed questions to Maureen Sorbet, director of the department's office of communications in Lansing. Sorbet said the agency would not respond except to supply the report.

"While it is impossible to know whether additional actions of DHS would have changed the ultimate outcome for the Braman family, it is important to remember that despite the best efforts of agencies like ours, tragedies will occur," the report concludes.

A separate Michigan Office of Children's Ombudsman investigation found Saginaw County Children's Protective Services erred by not determining that the older boys were the victims of torture. As such, it asserted, Protective Services failed to apply a section of state law that requires the department to file a petition for termination of parental rights.

In its response, the Department of Human Services said torture is a legal standard but that is not defined in child protection law.

The findings leave troubling questions about the failures of the social service system, lawmakers said.

The Office of Children's Ombudsman, an independent state agency that looks into complaints about Michigan's child welfare system, in its report issued Thursday also faulted Montcalm County Children's Protective Services for failing to investigate the 2006 complaint that Braman sexually assaulted the neighbor and used the cattle prod on his children.

"It's unusual for CPS to look at a complaint such as this with cattle prodding used for discipline and not protect all the children," said Verlie M. Ruffin, the Children's Ombudsman. "If there is abuse and neglect, you at least file a petition with the court. The facts in the case were there, and they had a responsibility to protect the children.

"I hope that (Montcalm's Protective Services) will take our recommendations seriously."

State Sen. Alan Cropsey, whose district encompasses Montcalm County, said he was as troubled by this oversight as anything in the reports.

"That's where the training has to come in and you say, 'Look, this is serious.' When you are talking about sexual molestation and a cattle prod, you don't need an advanced degree to know that's wrong."

Nicholas' mother said she is not satisfied by the investigation.

"Montcalm should be fully investigated from the top to the bottom, not just one agency. It has to be everyone that ignored all the red flags," Jasinski said. "I want accountability."

The Department of Human Services report recommended 11 administrative changes because of failures in the case. Among them were increased staff performance reviews, better oversight and more team decision making.

The Braman case is one in a series of blows to a social service network that has come under increasing scrutiny.

In 2005, 7-year-old Ricky Holland's foster-turned-adoptive parents killed him after a series of mistakes by social workers in Jackson and Ingham counties.

Earlier this month, a court-ordered study concluded that state caseworkers did not make face-to-face visits with abused or neglected children and failed to conduct background checks before placing children with relatives.

It found that children in foster homes were victims two-and-a-half times more than the reasonable threshold set by the federal government.

Among the actions ordered by Human Services are performance reviews of involved staff, with "appropriate action taken as soon as possible."

Montcalm County Human Services also must hire a family-to-family facilitator for critical cases, its staff is undergoing additional training and its supervisor will have to shadow a Children's Protective Services supervisor from another county for a minimum of two weeks.

More oversight of Montcalm County Human Services will include a review of sample cases to ensure compliance with critical child safety policies and law.

Steve Yager, author of the Human Services report, said the department is determined to learn from this.

"It is significant. Our staff will never forget this. It will impact how they handle cases today and tomorrow."

For his survivors, one of the most heartbreaking items Nicholas Braman left behind was a suicide note, written in his childish hand, saying he wanted to be with his father and stepmother "forever and ever."

Authorities did not consider him capable of making such a decision because of his age.

"I'm going to stay with them forever and ever and ever and ever with them now. I take care of my mom and dad just like they take care of me," it read. v

Grand Rapids Press staff writer Theresa D. McClellan contributed to this story.

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KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Community grieves for teenager: Sadness pervasive for girl who was chained to her bed

Sunday, March 02, 2008

BY CHRIS KILLIAN

Special to the Gazette

AND PAULA M. DAVIS

Kalamazoo Gazette

CENTREVILLE -- The death of Calista Springer, who perished in a house fire last week while chained to her bed, has shaken this small village of 1,500 people.

As residents struggled with the tragedy Saturday, some expressed confusion. Many were angry. All were saddened.

"It's just a tragic situation. I don't know what to think about it," said Cindy Martini, who saw the thick smoke billow from the house Wednesday morning. "There's probably more to this situation than meets the eye. It seems like a real mystery."

Calista's parents told investigators they used a dog chain tied around the 16-year-old's waist to keep her in bed at night because her emotional problems and "special needs" made her prone to wander and leave the house.

They said they previously used a system with a fabric tether and an alarm, but it broke three days before the fire, causing them to resort to the chain. Police said they believe the chain had been used for more than three days.

The Michigan State Police said they would forward their investigation to St. Joseph County prosecutors for potential charges as early as this week.

Good intentions

The Springers' pastor, the Rev. David Peterson of Centreville Baptist Church, said stories are circulating around the community about the circumstances surrounding Calista's death and why she was restrained.

"They thought it was the right thing to do," said Peterson, whose church in downtown Centreville is just steps from the Springers' burned-out home.

"They had the best of intentions. There was love for her, and I really believe they cared about Calista."

Firefighters discovered Calista's body tightly chained in her bed on the second floor of the home. She died from smoke inhalation. Investigators believe the fire was an accident and may have been started by a vacuum cleaner Calista's stepmother, Marsha, was using.

Calista's father, Tony, was at work and her two younger sisters were in school when the fire broke out around 8:30 a.m. Calista had been home-schooled in recent years.

Lawmaker urges caution

State Rep. Rick Shaffer, R-Three Rivers, whose district includes Centreville, cautioned against a rush to judgment about Calista's father and stepmother.

"All of us in this community are hurting so it's easy to want to begin to point fingers," Shaffer said. "But I think we all need to be cautious and let the investigative process work through."

Shaffer is a member of a child-protection task force, which met Monday at the St. Joseph County Courthouse, located across the street from the Springer home.

Calista died, Shaffer noted, "less than 1,000 feet from where we were talking about this very issue."

The tragedy should make the community even more vigilant to watch out for its children, he said.

"The death of a child is certainly tragic and that has to be foremost in people's minds," Shaffer said. "Then as we take a broader look at the situation, especially in light of the child welfare task force, we just need to step up our energies in all of our communities, being watchful."

Shaffer said, "It's everyone's responsibility to report suspicions."

Tony Springer told the Gazette last week that the family had four to five prior contacts with workers from Children's Protective Services, but his children were never removed from his home.

On Saturday, Christine Ganger said Calista sought refuge in her family's home in 2004. Calista had walked there with Ganger's younger sister, Katie, who was then a classmate of Calista.

"She seemed real nervous around people," said Ganger, 21. "She wasn't sociable at all. She said she was trying to get away from home."

After about 20 minutes, Calista's principal showed up and took her home, Ganger said.

A better place

Christy Kirk, a worker at the Subway restaurant in town, said Calista's death makes her angry.

"Something should have been done to help that girl a long time ago," said Kirk, standing outside the shop on her break, taking the last few drags off a cigarette. "Why did it have to get to this point for there to be an investigation, for her situation to be taken seriously?"

Still, Kirk said, "at least she's in a better place now."

As he prepares for Calista's memorial service on Monday, Peterson said he is hoping the community will focus on her life and not on the tragic circumstances of her death.

"With all the uneasiness, how do we establish a foundation to build on and go forward?" Peterson asked. "We need to allow the investigation to take its course. If there is wrongdoing found, then there needs to be forgiveness."

Shaffer said one emotion is pervasive.

"It's just sad," Shaffer said. "It's just a very sad time right now."

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KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Centreville churchgoers asked to open their hearts to girl's family

Monday, March 03, 2008

BY ROBERTO ACOSTA

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CENTREVILLE -- In a sermon that could serve as a prelude to today's memorial service for Calista Springer, the Rev. David Peterson asked his congregation Sunday to set aside their questions for the moment and instead open their hearts.

"In the tragedy of last week, it's so easy to get caught up in the how and why could this take place, that it then becomes a shield to expressing love and compassion," Peterson told worshippers at Centreville Baptist Church.

Calista Springer, 16, died in a house fire Wednesday while she was chained to her bed.

Her parents have said she had emotional problems and was prone to leaving the house at night. They told investigators they resorted to tying a dog chain around her waist after a system with a fabric tether and an alarm broke.

Peterson was set to officiate at a memorial service for Calista at 11 a.m. today at the church, just steps from the family's home in downtown Centreville.

The Springers attend the church, but they were absent from Sunday's service, where a sense of solemnity and loss hovered over the small congregation.

"With heavy hearts due to events of last week, we continue to lift up the Springer family in prayer," Peterson said to about two dozen churchgoers. Peterson wove the tragedy into his sermon in an effort to help the congregation cope with Calista's death and reconcile what had occurred.

"I hope everything comes out good for those people," said Wilma Masterson, 90, who attended the service. "I feel awfully sorry for the family."

Masterson said the tragic circumstances of Calista's death are still sinking in for her.

"I've kind of tried to think of some reason (why this happened)," she said. "I don't know what to think."

Peterson, who has been at the church for 27 years, asked the congregation to help the Springer family build "strength through the suffering."

The church board met after Sunday's sermon to discuss a fund being collected for the family. An offering at the end of Sunday's service went to the fund, which Peterson said would help offset costs for the funeral and other family expenses.

Donations can be made to the Centreville Baptist Church or First National Bank in Centreville, Peterson said.

More foster parents needed, experts say

By CLAY TAYLOR
Capital News Service
February 29, 2008

LANSING - The state is suffering a painful shortage of foster parents, and part of the problem may be the system itself, says Department of Human Services (DHS) Director Ismael Ahmed.

“The child welfare system needs reformation,” Ahmed said. “We need to take a closer look at it, make changes and garner our resources.”

In any given year, only 2,600 children find a foster home out of the 4,000 in need.

To help find a family for the nearly 4,000 foster children who need a home and provide a strong foundation for the rest of their lives, the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange is producing the Michigan Heart Gallery, a photography exhibit featuring some of the state’s foster children.

The goal of the exhibit is to help find homes for children that need them, said Heart Gallery director Regina Funkhouser.

“The Heart Gallery hopes to shed light on a group of children we know really need some extra special attention,” Funkhouser said. “The intention of the gallery is to drive people to the Web site to get more information about adoption.”

The Jackson-based organization is “an information and referral service for prospective adoptive parents interested in adopting children with ‘special needs’ and for adoption

workers looking for homes for these children.”

Nearly 50 Michigan photographers participated in the project, photographing roughly 60 children.

Robert Hendricks, Lansing photographer and photo adviser for the State News, Michigan State University’s student paper, has shot two photos for the gallery, the latest featuring a 7-year-old in Lansing.

“It’s a good way to cast these children in a positive light,” Hendricks said. “It was also a good outlet for me to get my camera out and take some pictures.”

This is the gallery’s third appearance in Michigan. It kicked off in Grand Rapids and will travel to Traverse City, Lansing, Battle Creek, Kalamazoo, Southfield and Detroit, among other cities. The schedule can be found online at www.miheart.org/2008.

The state’s foster care system came under attack from the New York-based Children’s Rights Inc., alleging in a lawsuit that the system is dangerously understaffed and responsible for the deaths of five children in foster care.

The “national watchdog organization” blamed the deaths partly on the excessive number of foster cases assigned to each caseworker.

“Generally, the hope of DHS management appears to be to stay within 30 cases,” the organization said. “Although DHS is not capable of producing administrative data to show the number of DHS or private agency caseworkers whose caseloads exceed 30 children, it is widely acknowledged that there are many.”

Another major problem facing children in foster care is aging out. Once a child turns

18 or graduates from high school, he is she is no longer the responsibility of the state.

Nearly 500 children age out of the system every year.

Funkhouser said that statistically, they are more likely to face teen pregnancy, homelessness and trouble with the law than children who are set up with a family.

“The outlook for children that age out of the system is grim,” Funkhouser said. “It is economically a bad idea for our community. Socially it’s a bad idea for our community, not to mention the personal cost to house these 500 kids who are not connected with a family.”

To adopt a child, prospective foster parents must provide three references and pass both a background check and a home inspection.

“There are no income requirements, you don't need to own your home,” Funkhouser said. “Honestly, there are so many children with so many different kinds of needs that so many different kinds of families are necessary.”

A child like Shae, February’s featured child on the organization’s Web site, for example, would do best in a sibling-free environment with a single female adult.

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College support for foster children limited

By WHITNEY LLOYD
Capital News Service

LANSG - Anna Dexter-Cheeks takes three buses each morning to get where she never thought she'd go.

Reared in Michigan's foster care system from the age of 3, she is now 21 and the places she's called "home" read like a Southeast Michigan road map - Detroit, Southfield, Allen Park, Detroit again, Dearborn and Garden City.

She now has a 4-year-old daughter, no job, no car and no home of her own - they stay with a friend. But each morning as her bus rumbles to a stop at Kalamazoo Valley Community College (KVCC), her fellow passengers could be mistaken for thinking her a typical college student.

It's an illusion Dexter-Cheeks works hard to maintain.

"I try to dress like the other kids even though I don't have the money. I try to know what the hot topics are so I can at least join in conversation, but I never can. I've never had the opportunity to live my age."

Despite the social land mines that await her on campus, she carries 13 credit hours that she hopes will put her closer to her dream of becoming a social worker.

For her second semester of college this spring, financial troubles forced Dexter-Cheeks to transfer to KVCC from nearby Western Michigan University, where she had begun last fall.

But thanks to a new program, she and as many other academically qualified former foster children who apply can attend Western next year on a full-tuition scholarship designed for students like her.

The Foster Youth and Higher Education Initiative will not only provide foster care students with financial assistance in the form of the four-year, full-tuition John Seita Scholarships, but also with the support network

traditional students have in their families.

"These students will enter the university as a cohort and will be in a class together called the First Year Experience. It will orientate them to the university, help them with critical thinking and time management skills, and help them find tutoring and counseling right on campus," said Yvonne Unrau, an associate professor of social work.

About 500 young people leave Michigan's foster care system each year. Of them, 100 enroll in higher education programs, but only 25 ever complete a degree, according to the Department of Human Services.

Prior to Western's initiative, former foster students were forced to cobble together financial aid from educational training vouchers of \$5,000 a year, the state's Tuition Incentive Program and federal Pell grants, said Kate Hanley, director of the department's foster care permanency program.

With such shaky financial backing, the minute they ran into one of life's snags, they often had no choice but to drop out, she said.

It's a scenario John Seita of Battle Creek - for whom the scholarships are named - is all too familiar with. As a child, Seita went through 15 foster homes in 11 years before managing to earn three degrees from Western and going on to teach child welfare classes at Michigan State University.

"As students, former foster kids experience the emotional challenges that come from abandonment, loneliness and sadness," he said. "They also experience practical challenges that traditional students might not."

"Regular students have parents who have experience dealing with issues like seeking help from professors, what to do when you're short on money, how to do your laundry, where to go on Christmas break when the dorms close."

"The program at Western will provide those mentors that former foster kids need to be successful," he continued. "It's the perfect storm of good events."

Other schools are following Western's lead.

For example, the \$2 million Paul and Amy Blavin Scholars fund at the University of Michigan offers former foster children \$5,000 a year. U of M has five Blavin scholars, said Judy Malcolm, the university's senior director of executive communications.

MSU's School of Social Work offers about \$1,200 a year to former foster children studying to become social workers.

But such programs are just a drop in the bucket when compared to the hundreds of former foster children who could go to college each year if the resources existed to support them.

Seita, Hanley and Amy Smither of the Michigan Campus Compact are committed to adding more colleges to the list by increasing awareness of foster students' needs.

"We are trying to get universities to understand that there is this population of former foster kids that have special needs," Smither said. "When they do, they say, 'How can we help?'"

Beyond university outreach, another important piece of the puzzle, they say, is educating middle and high school teachers about the need to present college as a realistic possibility to foster children.

"We need to build up their spirit, convince them they can do it," Seita said. "Foster kids often come from dismal environments where they don't see people succeed, and so they think people who go to college must be superhuman. The goal needs to be to expose them to a broader range of experiences and opportunities than they have seen."

Opportunities that Dexter-Cheeks lives every day.

"When I'm walking on campus or studying in the library, I feel so proud of myself, but I'm careful not to get too prideful because it could all go away any minute," she said.

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Detroit News Editorial

March 1, 2008

Attorney general makes child support gains

Kudos to state Attorney General Mike Cox's staff for reaching the \$50 million mark during the last four years in child support collections. Last year alone, the Attorney General's Office collected more than \$15.4 million in payments due from deadbeat parents. The Attorney General's Office claims it has led the nation over the last five years in reducing the number of child support cases in which back payments were due.



KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

HEAD START CHANGES

Sunday, March 02, 2008

Kalamazoo County officials have made several changes since a February 2007 federal audit found that many screenings for low-income children weren't being completed under the county's Head Start program.

So far this year, 9 percent of children in the program have missed screenings, the county reports. Last June, county officials said 62 percent of children had missed screenings.

Major changes have been made in Head Start staffing, including:

v Noreen Reardon, who helped manage the Head Start program for four years, was fired on July 13. She was replaced by Kathleen Wade in September. Reardon sued the county in October, saying she was fired in retaliation for raising concerns about staff time spent on Head Start. The suit is pending.

v Barbara Young, director of the Community Action Bureau, which includes Head Start, retired after reaching a severance agreement on July 31 with the county. Young, who had come under scrutiny after the federal audit, was replaced last year by Miguel Rodriguez. When she retired, Young was defended by eight members of the Community Action Bureau's advisory board.

v Marti Perry resigned as Head Start program manager in September and was replaced last month by Susan Sigfried-Wilson.

v Head Start nutritionist Scott Weber resigned last month. He has not been replaced.

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KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Children from poor families need a better Head Start

Sunday, March 02, 2008

If ever there were an early-childhood program that could have a huge impact on the lives of at-risk children from poor families, Head Start is it.

But that's only if it is a well-run program staffed by well-trained people who teach in safe schools and make sure the children are healthy.

Unfortunately, that hasn't been the case with the Head Start program in Kalamazoo County. Because of that, the county's poorest, most disadvantaged children have been shortchanged.

However, we believe county officials recognize the deficiencies of the local program and have resolved to clean it up.

Programs like the federally funded Head Start are crucial to the lives of children from low-income families. Such children, without early intervention, are already behind other students on the first day of kindergarten.

Since its inception in 1965, Head Start's mission has been to get disadvantaged children ready for school by providing them and their families educational, health, nutritional and social development assistance. Its emphasis is on getting parents involved in their children's schooling.

The problems in Kalamazoo County are purely local in nature:

- v Last year, 62 percent of children had missed at least one mandatory health screening.
- v The county Health and Community Services administrative staff wasn't devoting enough time to administering the Head Start program.
- v There wasn't enough time, space, equipment or adult supervision for motor skills development.
- v Some Head Start classrooms were unsafe or had poor lighting.

Head Start advocates warn that new rules for the program coming out of Washington call for higher standards, but don't provide more money to help put them in place.

The standards, in and of themselves, are a welcome improvement.

They call for increased credential requirements for teachers, service workers and other staff; more in-service training; priority enrollment for homeless children; mandatory enrollment for disabled children; and new record-keeping and reporting requirements.

The National Head Start Association, a private not-for-profit advocacy group, in a press release last month said that the unfunded mandates would put Head Start "on a path to crisis."

By the NHSA's estimates, Head Start programs will have had funding cut 11 percent since 2002, when allocations are adjusted for inflation.

It is crucial that Head Start programs nationwide be improved. Inadequate programs are unacceptable. The new mandates from Congress are a promising start.

But meeting tougher standards with less funding to do so seems like a formula for failure.

Juvenile detention centers record 13,000 claims of abuse in 4 years

March 3, 2008

COLUMBIA, Miss. (AP) -- The Columbia Training School -- pleasant on the outside, austere on the inside -- has been home to 37 of the most troubled young women in Mississippi.

If some of those girls and their advocates are to be believed, it is also a cruel and frightening place.

The school has been sued twice in the past four years. One suit brought by the U.S. Justice Department, which the state settled in 2005, claimed detainees were thrown naked in to cells and forced to eat their own vomit. The second one, brought by eight girls last year, said they were subjected to "horrendous physical and sexual abuse." Several of the detainees said they were shackled for 12 hours a day.

These are harsh and disturbing charges -- and, in the end, they were among the reasons why state officials announced in February that they will close Columbia. But they aren't uncommon.

Across the country, in state after state, child advocates have deplored the conditions under which young offenders are housed -- conditions that include sexual and physical abuse and even deaths in restraints. The U.S. Justice Department has filed lawsuits against facilities in 11 states for supervision that is either abusive or harmfully lax and shoddy.

Still, a lack of oversight and nationally accepted standards of tracking abuse make it difficult to know exactly how many youngsters have been assaulted or neglected.

The Associated Press contacted each state agency that oversees juvenile correction centers and asked for information on the number of deaths as well as the number of allegations and confirmed cases of physical, sexual and emotional abuse by staff members since Jan. 1, 2004.

According to the survey, more than 13,000 claims of abuse were identified in juvenile correction centers around the country from 2004 through 2007 -- a remarkable total, given that the total population of detainees was about 46,000 at the time the states were surveyed in 2007.

Just 1,343 of those claims of abuse identified by the AP were confirmed by various authorities. Of 1,140 claims of sexual abuse, 143 were confirmed by investigators.

Experts say only a fraction of the allegations are ever confirmed. These are some of the most troubled young people in the country and some will make up stories. But in other cases, the youth are pressured not to report abuse; often, no one believes them anyway.

Undoubtedly, juvenile correction facilities and their programs benefit many of the youth who experience them by offering substance abuse programs, educational courses and mental health counseling. And for many troubled youth, the facilities are the last hope to straighten out problems that could eventually lead them to suicide, prison or other institutions. Still, advocates for the detainees contend that abuse by guards remains a major problem and that authorities aren't doing enough to address the situation.

In 2004, the U.S. Justice Department uncovered 2,821 allegations of sexual abuse by juvenile correction staffers. The government study included 194 private facilities, which likely accounts for the higher numbers than the AP found.

But some experts say the true number of sexual incidents is likely even higher. Some youth view sexual relationships with staff members as consensual, not as adults in positions of authority abusing their power. Sue Burrell, an attorney for the Youth Law Center in San Francisco, recalls investigating sexual encounters between female staff and male inmates at a juvenile facility in Florida. "One of the boys I interviewed said he didn't think it was fair that his roommate had a relationship with one of the staffers and he didn't."

Other abuse is physical, and often sadistic.

For boys at the Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility, authority came in the person of 50-year-old Gilbert Hicks, and he wielded that authority emphatically.

Hicks was convicted of sexual assault in October 2005 after he "grabbed, squeezed and twisted" a boy's testicles, according to a federal lawsuit. When the boy sought medical attention 10 days later because of pain and swelling, Hicks, who had worked at the facility for 24 years, taunted him by asking: "What, you want me to squeeze your (genitals) again?" Hicks allegedly abused two other boys the same way.

His sentence? Five years probation and 90 days in jail to be served on weekends.

What sets the case apart from many others is the successful conviction. Often such cases come down to the word of a guard against that of a teenager with a long criminal record, the primary reason that so few charges of abuse are confirmed and prosecuted, child advocates say. While it is likely that incarcerated youth make false allegations of mistreatment against their guards, there are cases of abuse not being reported because "many children are afraid of what would happen if they snitch on staff," said Mark Soler, executive director of the Center for Children's Law and Policy in Washington D.C.

The worst physical confrontations can end in death. At least five juveniles died after being forcibly placed in restraints in facilities run by state agencies or private facilities with government contracts since Jan. 1, 2004.

The use of restraint techniques and devices and their too-aggressive application have long been controversial and came under intense scrutiny last year after the death of 14-year-old Martin Lee Anderson.

A grainy video taken at a Florida boot camp in January 2006 shows several guards striking the teen while restraining him. Six guards and a nurse were acquitted Oct. 12 of manslaughter charges after defense attorneys argued that the guards used acceptable tactics.

In Maryland, 17-year-old Isaiah Simmons lost consciousness and died after he was held to the floor face down at a privately owned facility that was contracted by the state. Prosecutors say the staff waited 41 minutes after the boy was unresponsive to call for help.

Scott Rolle, an attorney for one of the counselors, had said the men were only trying to prevent Simmons from hurting himself or someone else. A

judge dismissed misdemeanor charges against five counselors; the state has appealed.

Other restraint-related deaths were three boys -- 17, 15 and 13 -- in facilities in Tennessee, New York and Georgia, respectively. At least 24 others in juvenile correction centers died since 2004 from suicide and natural causes or preexisting medical conditions.

Supervision does not have to be abusive to be problematic. The absence of supervision creates its own misery.

Advocates say sex among detainees is also a major problem in some facilities, a claim backed by government findings. A U.S. Department of Justice report described sex at the Plainfield Juvenile Correctional Facility in Indiana as "rampant."

And sometimes suicidal youth or those who want to harm themselves in other ways don't get the personal attention they need.

Mississippi's juvenile correction centers have been under the supervision of a court-appointed monitor since 2005 as part of the settlement to end the lawsuit filed by the federal government.

But a 15-year-old girl on suicide watch at Columbia Training School used a toe nail and the sharpened cap off a tube of toothpaste to carve the words "HATE ME" backward in her forearm. The girl also said she was shackled 12 hours a day, and forced to wear leg restraints to classes, meals and other activities.

Another 15-year-old girl who spent time in Columbia told the AP she was twice groped by a male guard. She said she reported the abuse. "They told me I was lying," she said with tears streaming down her face. "They told me that I was wrong for reporting it, that I shouldn't have brought it up."

Columbia sits atop a 2,200-acre campus with a manicured lawn that stretches out beneath the shade of oak trees. From a distance, the red-brick buildings and pastoral grounds could pass for those of a boarding school. Indeed, administrators pointed proudly to the fact that 90 percent of the girls got their general education diploma.

"We are giving them skills that they will take well into adulthood," insisted Richard Harris, a deputy administrator with the Mississippi Department of Human Services -- a few weeks before the state announced it was closing Columbia "due to issues ranging from adequate staffing to quality of care, and the desire to most efficiently spend taxpayer dollars."

While officials in many states complain that funding can be a major challenge -- salaries for guards in Mississippi's juvenile facilities start at \$18,000 a year -- it will take more than cash to fix the problems. "What could be done to minimize or reduce these problems?" asked Melissa Sickmund, with the Pittsburgh-based National Center for Juvenile Justice. "Training. Oversight."

Columbia had about 120 staff members and a \$5.8 million budget and at times housed only a few dozen girls. At that rate, it costs about \$598 a day to house a girl, according to a study by Timothy J. Roche, an expert consultant hired by the state.

There are success stories.

Nancy Molever, an Arizona Juvenile Department of Corrections spokeswoman, said it would have been difficult to improve conditions there -- or meet recommendations made by the federal government -- without a willingness "to change the culture of the agency" that oversees the juvenile facilities. Arizona recently emerged from a lawsuit the Justice Department filed after three youngsters committed suicide. Arizona invested \$8 million to \$10 million in facility improvements and increased the starting annual salary of youth correctional officers to over \$30,000, Molever said. The state has also been weeding out employees slow to conform to the new rules, Molever said, but the downside is more employee turnover, which is already a problem nationwide.

Officials in Missouri, which has one of the most highly regarded juvenile correction systems in the country, agree that it takes more than money to run a safe facility.

"It's just a different approach that we take. It's a treatment approach," said Ana Margarita Compain-Romero, a spokeswoman for the Missouri Department of Social Services. "In other states, they take a more punitive approach, more like corrections."

Cadillac News

March 3, 2008

Police investigating father/son stabbing

CADILLAC - A hospitalization of an assault victim at Mercy Hospital led to a police investigation early Sunday, a Cadillac Police Department release by Det. Lt. Todd M. Golnick stated.

A 50-year-old Cadillac man was dropped off at the emergency room about 3:50 a.m. Sunday with a single stab wound in the chest. It was revealed that he was stabbed during an argument with his 28-year-old son at a Cadillac residence, the report said.

The son, also a resident of Cadillac, was arrested and is expected to be formally charged today.

The victim is listed in stable condition at Mercy Hospital, the release stated.

Many seniors miss out on food assistance

By DIANE IVEY
Capital News Service
February 29, 2008

LANSING—More than 550,000 Michigan families participate in the food assistance program, but according to the League for Human Services and Department of Human Services, thousands of eligible senior citizens don't.

Approximately 5,000 to 10,000 seniors in Southwest Michigan alone aren't taking advantage of such programs, according to Andrea Meewes, project director of Michigan's Coordinated Access to Food for the Elderly (MiCAFE), an organization that helps seniors get food assistance.

And according to Kate White, executive director of Elder Law of Michigan, many seniors aren't aware they qualify for food assistance, so they don't take the few steps required to register.

"More and more adults are falling into poverty every day," White said. "They don't know they qualify for food assistance, as well as things like Medicare or Medicaid. But having that extra assistance can be a huge increase in monthly disposable income."

The number of people receiving food assistance in the state has gone up more than 10 percent in some counties from 2006 to December 2007, an economic security study by the League for Human Services said.

White and Meewes cited the rising costs of housing, gas and medical care as the reason for the increased number of eligible seniors. Meewes emphasized the cost of prescription drugs, because the average senior is on three to five daily medications.

"A lot of people are paying money out of pocket, especially for Medicare premiums," Meewes said. "Everything in a senior's life is going up in price dramatically."

The average benefit for seniors on the program is about \$60 per month, plus up to \$100 in Medicare savings. The MiCAFE program includes an application for medical assistance to pay insurance premiums.

Caseworkers in Human Services have been forced to increase their caseloads from 200 cases to up to 1,000 cases, Director Ismael Ahmed said.

"One third of the people in this state are in or near poverty," Ahmed said. "When a third of our people can't get by on the money they make, we need to attack this."

"So many low-income seniors are able to get food stamps, but they haven't done so," he said.

According to White, MiCAFE recruits volunteers in counties, including St. Joseph and Kalamazoo, who are trained to help seniors fill out the Internet forms, conduct eligibility interviews and complete other one-on-one steps they would otherwise have to do at a state office.

Meewes said one reason seniors don't apply for food assistance is because they don't like going to a Department of Human Services office.

"It's not a comfortable environment for seniors," Meewes said. "It's overcrowded, the caseworkers are overwhelmed. Because of that, long waits are inevitable. That's a difficult thing for seniors to deal with."

Seniors also don't seek assistance because they're reluctant to ask for help, Meewes said.

"We tell them that they've paid their dues," Meewes said. "They've worked hard at life, they've raised a family, they've been active members of their communities. The least the state can do in return is to give them the resources to buy food."

Both White and Meewes stressed that all eligible seniors can take advantage of food assistance. Because it's a federal entitlement program, there's no limit on the number of people who can receive benefits.

"Sometimes seniors think they need to save food assistance for younger families with children," Meewes said.

"But that's not the case. It's not a limited benefit at this point. Seniors aren't taking someone's spot, they're simply using a resource that's

been specifically provided for them,” she said.

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Food Banks sort on personal care products

By HARRY GILLEN
Capital News Service
February 29, 2008

LANSING – Food bank systems across western Michigan have seen an increase of 30-35 percent in donations since the year before, said Teresa Pawl-Knapp, assistant director at Second Harvest Gleaners Food Bank of West Michigan Inc. in Grand Rapids.

But food pantry beneficiaries lack other essentials like personal care products, Knapp said.

“When a person is in need, they’re really in need of everything to run a household,” Knapp said.

“If you think about it, personal care products are high-priced items. When you’re struggling to pay heat and electric bills, you definitely want personal care products as well. People who want to donate these products are always welcome in addition to food,” Knapp said.

Kathy Walter, food pantry coordinator for Immaculate Conception Church in Traverse City, said her pantry has seen a 10 percent increase in donations from last year, but is still struggling to provide personal care products.

“Food stamps don’t cover products like toothbrushes, deodorant, toilet paper or dish soap. They only go for food,” Walter said. “People who haven’t experienced that side of life don’t always realize that.”

The increase has also coupled a rise in people seeking assistance, and food bank systems are “hanging in there,” Pawl-Knapp said.

“We’re blessed in Michigan to have a high number of people with discretionary income who are willing to donate. And we’ve seen a wonderful response of financial donations which helps our institution significantly.

“It’s a long road for economic recovery in the state of Michigan in this transitional period,” Pawl-Knapp said.

Walter said that the shelves in her pantry are still “pretty empty” due to the high need and the high cost of gas and utilities.

“People can’t afford groceries. They need gas in their car if they need to get back to work,” Walter said. “People will do that before they buy food. Or they’ll pay a utility bill, and get to the point where they have no more money to pay for food.”

The greater demand for food banks is not limited to western Michigan, said William Long, executive director of the Food Bank Council in Lansing.

“We’re seeing the impact statewide,” Long said. “The thing that is challenging in food bank networks in rural areas is the cost of transportation. If the round trip is 70 or 80 miles instead of 10, it makes it difficult. It impacts on the ability to access some of the food banking systems.”

The Kent County Emergency Needs Task Force in Grand Rapids is addressing the problem by conducting a study funded by Grand Valley State University that will assess the overall distribution of food resources in the state.

“It will determine what we have and what we need to do to do it effectively,” said David Schroeder, the consultant manager for the Task Force.

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Muskegon Chronicle

Mission didn't know man was sex offender

Saturday, March 01, 2008

By Federico Martinez

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MUSKEGON -- Officials of a Muskegon homeless shelter say they weren't aware they were housing a convicted sex offender who is now charged with molesting a young teenage boy at a Fruitport Township church.

Aaron Michael Winston, 21, who listed his address as the Muskegon Rescue Mission, 400 W. Laketon, was arraigned Thursday before 60th District Judge Harold F. Closz III.

Winston is charged with second-degree criminal sexual conduct during a felony, accosting a child for immoral purposes and failing to comply with the sex offender registration act. The basis for the third charge was unclear.

"It makes me feel sick," said Carla Skoglund, Rescue Mission executive director. "We didn't know that he was on probation or a sex offender.

"When we know it, we work closely with the probation officer and police department."

Winston had registered his address on the sex offender registry as the Rescue Mission. The state sex offender registry is readily available for public viewing on the Internet.

The Rescue Mission doesn't run background checks on people as a condition for receiving help, Skoglund said. Under the shelter's current policy, staff would not learn about a person's background unless they volunteered the information or a probation officer informs them, she said.

Even if Rescue Mission staff had known Winston was a convicted sex offender, they wouldn't have denied him services, Skoglund said. They would have watched him and reported any suspicious activity to police and the probation officer, Skoglund said.

There were no outward signs that Winston posed a threat to anyone, she said.

"He was really mild-mannered," she said. "He would sweep the floors and leave. He was very low-key."

The incident involving Winston occurred at Broadway Baptist Church, 2860 S. Oak Lane, during a church service Sunday, according to Fruitport Township police.

According to police, Winston followed the boy into a church bathroom. Winston allegedly showed the boy photographs of naked men that were on the defendant's cell phone, police said.

Winston then allegedly offered the boy \$20 to expose himself. The boy declined, and as he tried to leave, Winston allegedly touched the boy's genital area on the outside of his clothing, police said.

Winston was not affiliated with the church, other than occasionally attending it, officials said.

The Rev. Don Letson, said the church has several bus routes that pick up people to attend services. One is an adult route that goes by the Rescue Mission every week. It was that bus that Winston rode to the church on Sunday.

, officials said.

Letson said he did not blame the Rescue Mission for the incident.

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[More columns by Dean Calbreath](#)

Critics say poverty rate no longer reflects reality

UNION-TRIBUNE

March 2, 2008



It doesn't take much for elderly people to make their way out of poverty these days. At least not according to the federal government.

If you're an individual making anything more than \$10,210 per year – or a married couple making \$13,690 – congratulations! You're no longer destitute. You've managed to rise above the federal poverty line. You no longer need some of those welfare programs intended for the truly poor.

“But wait a minute,” you might say. “This is San Diego County. Can you really make as little as \$10,211 in this county and not be considered poor? Can you really be cut off from some government programs when you're making such little money?”

Well, that's the rub, isn't it? And that's why Paul Downey, president and chief executive of San Diego's Senior Community Centers – a group that provides care for about 7,500 seniors per year – was in Sacramento last week, pushing for a different way of calculating poverty.

“The poverty rate is a one-size-fits-all model that uses an antiquated, outdated method of determining economic prosperity. It doesn't reflect the realities of 2008,” said Downey, whose group specializes in helping seniors living below the official poverty level.

The federal poverty level was created in 1965 as a benchmark for determining what part of the population should benefit from the Great Society's anti-poverty programs.

Relying on consumption surveys from the 1950s, the level was based solely on the cost of the basic food budget needed to meet minimum nutritional requirements. Since families at that time spent a third of their budget on food, the poverty rate was calculated at three times the amount of money it takes to buy that minimal amount of food. It has since been adjusted upward each year to keep it level with inflation.

Critics of the poverty rate note that spending patterns have changed a lot in the past four decades. People now spend as little as one-seventh of their budget on food – less than half the ratio of the mid-1960s. The calculation doesn't take into account the jump in transportation, housing or medical costs over the past few years.

Equally problematic is that the poverty rate is a nationwide standard. The same rate is used in Jackson, Miss., or Waco, Texas, as in Chula Vista, Escondido and San Diego, despite the wide variances in the cost of living.

“The poverty line makes the assumption that the costs for housing, health care and food are consistent throughout the entire nation,” said Pam Smith, director of San Diego County Aging and Independence Services. “But no two counties are the same.”

The poverty level has a direct effect on how much help a senior citizen can receive from the government. To qualify for food stamps, net after-tax income must be no more than the poverty level. For Supplemental Security Income, an elder must earn less than 105 percent of the poverty level – amounting to \$10,272. For Medi-Cal, it's 127 percent, or \$12,972. For federal energy assistance, the minimum is 130 percent, or \$13,237 per year. For the Medicare prescription drug subsidy, it's 150 percent, or \$15,315.

“People look at the calculations and say, 'Well, these people are making above the poverty line; they must be making enough money to get by,' but they really aren't,” said Steven P. Wallace, associate director of the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. “Some (food) programs and caregiver support are prioritized to people below the poverty level. It's sort of sad to tell people, 'You're suffering, but you're not quite poor enough to get this.' ”

The UCLA center released a study last week highlighting the gap between the poverty rate and the amount of money it takes to live a financially secure life as a senior citizen in San Diego and other California counties.

According to the UCLA calculations, based on projected expenses for housing, food, transportation and health care, an elderly homeowner in San Diego County who has paid off the mortgage still requires at least \$15,678 per year to be economically secure. Mortgage payers need nearly twice that much, \$30,368, and renters need \$22,822.

An elderly couple requires \$23,912 if they own their home, \$38,603 if they are paying a mortgage and \$31,057 if they are renting.

Contrast those costs with the average payment coming from Social Security: \$12,255 for individuals and \$20,588 for couples.

"Maybe there are places in this country where people might afford to live on Social Security, but San Diego isn't one of them," said William Booth, 67, who has tried living on Social Security for the past five years.

Booth, a former purchasing manager for an auto parts factory, retired prematurely when his employer moved to Orange County. Three heart attacks put a crimp on his ability to find another job. He received about \$12,000 per year in Social Security and disability payments.

That was not enough to pay rent. For three years, Booth lived in his car, sleeping in parking lots around Mission Bay and SeaWorld, until he chanced upon the Potiker Family Senior Residence downtown.

"Thank God for senior community centers," Booth said. "Without subsidized housing, there would be no place I could afford."

The issue made it to Sacramento last week, when the state Senate Subcommittee on Aging and Long-Term Care held a daylong hearing into the gap between the poverty rate and the amount of money needed for seniors to live in California. Judging from the reaction of Sen. Elaine Alquist, D-San Jose, who chairs the committee, it seems likely that laws will be passed to make the poverty rate more reflective of reality.

"We've been making decisions based on really bad data," Alquist said. "There are a lot of people who are living in poverty in this country, and as a state and a country, we think we're doing good by them, but we're really not. For a lot of the elderly in particular, what should be the golden years are turning into the rusted years."

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